

Opening Statement

Rep. Bart Gordon

Ranking Member, U.S. House Committee on Science

**Hearing: *The Department of Commerce Inspector General's
Report of Ongoing Problems with Management of NOAA's Weather Satellites***

May 11, 2006

Mr. Chairman, we are here this morning to hear about the Inspector General's report on the management of the National Polar-orbiting Operational Environmental Satellite System - NPOESS - the joint environmental satellite program for NOAA and DOD.

But we are holding this hearing - the fourth during your tenure as Chairman - because this Committee understands the importance of these weather satellites to the nation.

Despite repeated assurances from Admiral Lautenbacher and other NOAA officials that problems in this program were being addressed, this program is in complete disarray. The cost overruns are enormous and it is far behind schedule. We are facing the very real possibility that NOAA will not fulfill its mandate to maintain continuity of weather data from our polar satellites.

What does this really mean for the nation? Well, the industries that have come to rely upon reliable three to five-day forecasts could find they are experiencing more delays in delivery of goods and services.

Energy companies use these long-range forecasts to prepare for weather-driven spikes in demand for air conditioning and heating. So, we may be looking at more brown-outs and black outs in our power supplies.

Citizens will have less reliable information on the lead time for severe storms and therefore less time to prepare to get out of harm's way and to secure their property from damage.

Farmers use the long-range forecast to determine optimal planting dates and times for application of fertilizers and pesticides. So their yields may suffer and they may waste time and energy re-planting or re-fertilizing their fields.

This isn't just about the inconvenience of getting a little wet because you didn't take your raincoat. As the long-range forecasts have become more reliable, individual citizens, emergency managers, and our commercial enterprises have come to depend upon this information to make decisions that involve public safety and commerce. We simply cannot afford a failure of this program.

We will not know the outcome of the DOD's review now underway as a result of the Nunn-McCurdy law until early next month. I hope DOD will not decide to withdraw from the program. The budget implications of that decision for NOAA would be extremely serious.

I simply do not see how NOAA could develop its own polar satellite series without major increases in its budget, this year and beyond. I am writing today to the President calling on his involvement in securing a Nunn-McCurdy decision that gives this program the hope of success.

Admiral, I simply don't know what to say. The Members of this Committee have tried for several years to cooperate with you and your agency to identify and address the problems with this program.

You and your staff denied the seriousness of these problems repeatedly when the Committee questioned the rate of program expenditures and the technical risks of the sensors identified by the GAO team working with us. Obviously, you did not take adequate steps to address the recurring problems presented to you in the monthly reports of the Integrated Program Office manager. I think the Inspector General's report very clearly confirms this assessment.

Admiral, things have got to change. This program is too important to NOAA for you not to be directly involved and invested in getting this program back on track. You may not be responsible for the technical challenges or inadequate budget assessments, but as the head of this agency and its representative to the EXCOM, you are responsible for acknowledging problems and initiating steps to address them in a timely fashion. In this role, you have shown nothing but failure.

While you now point to the whirlwind of activity you have engaged in since last March, when the lead contractor reported it could not deliver NPOESS on the baseline schedule and budget, that has been too little, too late.

The time to have done your job was in the many months prior to that unwanted report. I think it is clear that no one above the IPO office was actually paying attention to the warnings pulsing through the system. This doesn't look like "particularly rigorous management and oversight" to me that you claim to have applied to this program in your testimony.

Mr. Frazier, thank you for this report. I look forward to your testimony and exploring your recommendations for moving this program forward.